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PAPER

IN

POLITE ARTS.

POLITE ARTS.

The GREATER SILVER PALLET was this Seſſion voted to Mr. TIMOTHY SHELDRAKE, for the following Diſſertation on PAINTING IN OIL, in a manner ſimilar to that practiſed in the ancient Venetian School.

THE method of painting practiſed in the Venetian School, I conceive to have been as follows:

The cloth was primed with colours in diſtemper, of a browniſh hue, ſuch as would properly enter into the darkeſt parts of the picture. The moſt tranſparent colours are the propereſt. I believe umber was moſt generally uſed, broken with red, yellow, or blue, according to the tint intended to be produced, and diluted with chalk or whiting to the proper degree of ſtrength. Upon

the ground ſo prepared, the ſubject was correctly drawn with umber, pure, or mixed with lake, blue, or black; and, with the ſame colours, thoſe ſhadows that were darker than the ground were then painted in.

The artiſt then painted the lights with *pure white*, in a ſolid body, where the light was brighteſt, or where the full effect of colour was to be produced; and, where the demi-tints were afterwards to be, ſcumbling it thinner by degrees, till it united with the ſhadows.

In this manner the chiaro-oſcuro was finiſhed as much as poſſible, and the local colour of every object in the picture glazed over it. All the colours uſed in this part of the work were ground in oil, which was abſorbed into the ground, the picture remaining flat, ſomething like a picture in water-colours or crayons; it was then varniſhed, till ſaturated with varniſh, and the full of every colour brought out: the picture was then complete.

Upon

Upon the moſt ſuperficial view of this proceſs, it will be evident that a picture painted by it is, as to all viſible properties, a varniſh picture; for the ſmall quantity of oil that had been uſed, ſunk into the ground, and never could riſe again to be hurtful; while the varniſh, being laid on after the colours, gave them all the brilliancy and durability they could derive from that vehicle, without being liable to the objections that are made to painting in varniſh, ſuppoſing it to be uſed in the ſame manner as oil is in painting with oil. It is true that this mode of painting is itſelf liable to ſome objections; theſe I have endeavoured to obviate, and ſhall therefore mention hereafter. Here it may be obſerved that, as any varniſh may be uſed, it is to this circumſtance we muſt attribute the different degrees of durability in pictures of the Venetian School. I have ſeen ſome that would reſiſt the moſt powerful ſolvents, while others were deſtroyed by the weakeſt; though all poſſeſſed the

the apparent properties that diſtinguiſh the Venetian pictures from all others.

As I do not pretend to degrade painting to the rank of a mechanical art, that may be infallibly practiſed by a receipt, I ſhall be permitted to obſerve, that this was the general ſyſtem of the Venetian ſchool, which I have ſeen variouſly modified in the works of different artiſts of that, as well as of the Flemiſh, which is derived from it. It is ſuſceptible of an almoſt infinite number of modifications, in proportion to the talents, the judgment of, and the objects to be painted by the artiſts who may adopt it. This being the caſe, if it is proved by experiment that effects ſimilar to thoſe of the Venetian pictures may be produced by this method, and that the ſyſtem has a ſtrong tendency to produce that brilliancy, and harmony of colouring that is ſo much admired, with more certainty and facility than thoſe qualities can be obtained by any other mode of painting, I hope my caſe will be proved to the ſatisfaction of the Society.

I once

I once aſked Sir Joſhua Reynolds, by what circumſtances in the management of a picture he thought the harmony of colouring was to be produced? He replied, an unity of light and an unity of ſhadow ſhould pervade the whole. He explained to me the difficulty of reducing the various colours of all the objects that may be included in a picture, and the various modifications of thoſe colours to the ſimple, harmonious ſtate he deſcribed, and illuſtrated what he had ſaid by this ſimile. "A picture, to poſſeſs harmony of colouring, ſhould look as if it was painted with one colour (ſuppoſe umber and white), and, when the chiaro-oſcuro was complete, the colour of each object ſhould be glazed over it."

This obſervation, from ſuch authority, was impreſſed with peculiar force on my mind; and if I can retrace its operations on a ſubject which has ſo long engaged my attention, I ſhould ſay Sir Joſhua's obſervation was the clue that guided me through all my experiments, and, I hope, will enable me to prove,

prove, that the beautiful and ſimple practice which he ſuggeſted as a ſimile, was literally the practice of that ſchool upon whoſe works his ideas of colouring were founded. At the ſame time I may obſerve, that the fact ſeems to have eluded his obſervation, or he would not have uſed it as a compariſon to ſimplify his deſcription of a practice which he thought both difficult and complex.

In the Newtonian doctrine of Light and Colours, it is believed that all colours are inherent in light, and are rendered viſible by the action of various bodies, which reflect particular rays, and abſorb the reſt. Without diſputing the truth of this doctrine, it is to be obſerved, that a painter muſt conſider the objects he repreſents as being analogous to the materials he uſes to repreſent them; and, in this view of the ſubject, colour is to be conſidered as a property inherent in bodies, which is rendered viſible by the contact of light, a colourleſs, or at leaſt a mono-coloured ſubſtance, and ſhadow the mere privation of light.

A picture may repreſent either a group of figures, or other objects, in a room, or any objects in the open air: whatever the ſituation may be, it repreſents certain objects in a given ſpace, poſſeſſing individually their peculiar colours, and generally expoſed to the operations of light. The quantity of light each can receive muſt depend upon its form, and its poſition reſpecting that part whence the light comes; for, in proportion as other parts recede from the light, the ſhadow becomes viſible: but ſhadow is nothing but privation of light, and privation of colour, in proportion as the light is diminiſhed. Some attention to theſe circumſtances will, perhaps, enable us to demonſtrate the truth of Sir Joſhua's poſition.

If a globe of one colour be expoſed in a painter's room, properly darkened, that part which is neareſt the light will partake of its colour; the next part will ſhew the true colour of the object: that which firſt recedes from the light will be a little obſcured, the next a little more, and ſo on progreſſively,

progreſſively, till that part which is fartheſt from the light will loſe its colour, and appear equally dark with the ſhadieſt part of the room. Now we know this globe is of one uniform colour; the variations we ſee in different parts of it are only deceptions, occaſioned by the acceſſion of light in ſome parts, and the privation of it in others.

What is true of this one object and its parts, would be equally true of any number of objects, whatever their colours or relative ſituations might be: if they were placed together in the ſame room, each would poſſeſs its own individual colour, each would partake of the general light, in proportion to its ſituation, and of the general darkneſs in proportion as it recedes from the light. All this may be eaſily conceived; but the difficulty, and, in the ordinary modes of painting a ſerious one it is, is to repreſent ſuch objects with the appearance of truth, and preſerve the harmony neceſſary to conſtitute a whole. The Venetian painters however, by whatever means they obtained their

their knowledge, diſcovered a method ſo ſimple, that perhaps no other can produce ſuch brilliant effects, and undoubtedly not with facility and certainty at all comparable with theirs.

The artiſt will remark that, in deſcribing the whole of the Venetian method of painting, I have ſaid nothing of the manner of producing thoſe demi-tints which conduce ſo much to the brilliancy of a picture, which are ſo difficult to execute, and in which he moſt frequently fails. Thoſe tints are, in the ordinary modes of painting, produced by the mixture of black, grey, blue, or brown (according to the judgment of the artiſt), with the local colours of the objects. It is theſe tints which, from their being made with ſuch colours, it is difficult to get clear, and which never are ſo clear in any other as in the Venetian, and in ſome of the Flemiſh pictures, which are painted upon analogous principles. The fact is, that thoſe painters produced all ſuch tints without the admixture of any colour

to

to repreſent them, and by a method ſo like that by which they are produced in nature, that this circumſtance alone enſures a degree of brightneſs to their colours, and of harmony to their ſhadows, that it is perhaps impoſſible to produce, in an equal degree, by any other mode of painting.

It is a ſingular fact, which I have not ſkill in phyſics to be able to account for, though by numerous experiments I have aſcertained beyond contradiction, that if upon any degree of brown, between the deepeſt and the lighteſt brown yellow, we paint pure white, in gradations, from the ſolid body to the lighteſt tint that can be laid on, *all the tints between the ſolid white and the ground will appear to be* GREY, intenſe in proportion to the depth of the ground, and the thinneſs of the white laid upon it. But in every caſe all the tints laid upon one ground will harmonize with each other, and form one connected chain (if I may uſe the expreſſion), which will perfectly unite the higheſt light with the darkeſt ſhade.

If

If then we examine the component ſubſtances of a Venetian picture, we ſhall find the lighter parts conſiſt only of white, to repreſent the light; and of the local colours of the objects it repreſents, the demi-tints are imitated by an *appearance* almoſt as deceptive as the ſimilar appearances in nature: but in every other method of painting, theſe demi-tints are produced by mixing ſome duſky colour with the local colours and the light. The compariſon of theſe methods will afford a demonſtrative reaſon why the Venetian muſt be brighter than any other mode of painting.

Having ſhewn, as near to a demonſtration as the nature of the ſubject will perhaps admit, why thoſe parts of a Venetian picture that are connected with light and colours are brighter than the correſponding parts of any other pictures, it remains to explain the cauſe of ſimilar ſuperiority in the darker parts of the ſame pictures.

It has been ſaid, with much confidence, that as white repreſents light, ſo black is

the repreſentative of darkneſs. But though this may be true in phyſics, it certainly is not ſo in painting: for the painter's art is to repreſent objects as they *appear*, in point of colour, to be, not as they really are. Thus, if I know an object is perfectly black, and am to repreſent it as it appears to be at the diſtance of fifty feet, black from the pallet will not produce a good imitation of it, becauſe the interpoſition of fifty feet of the atmoſphere will cauſe it to appear of a colour different from what it really is; and *vice verſâ*, if we go into a cavern, a cellar, or a room, ſo darkened that the colour of no object can be diſtinctly ſeen, and if we there hold any ſolid black ſubſtance near to the eye, the difference will be viſible at once; the black object will be immediately diſtinguiſhed, by its ſolidity and colour, from the ſurrounding ſpace, and ſuch remote objects as may be obſcurely viſible through it. Theſe objects actually poſſeſs their individual colours, and only appear indiſtinctly from the abſence of light. The black object may appear ſolid,

and of that colour, from its proximity to the eye; but the circumjacent ones will appear of a colour perfectly diſtinct from it, more or leſs tranſparent, in proportion to their diſtance from the eye, and ſhewing a portion of their individual colours, according to the quantity of ill-defined light that may be admitted. Thus we ſee (if I may venture to mention ſo notorious a truiſm), that ſhadows are nothing real; they only ſeem to exiſt in the abſence of light, and give to objects an ill-defined appearance, diſtinct from, though in ſome inſtances mixed with, light and colours in different degrees: but as the painter muſt repreſent this *appearance* by ſomething *real*, he chooſes the colours moſt analogous, viz. browns, and the moſt tranſparent of their claſs, to repreſent this tranſparent, but imperfectly defined appearance in nature.

It has been ſuppoſed that the Venetian painters had ſome peculiarly rich and tranſparent brown colour, which is ſeen to pervade all the works of that ſchool; the effect

of which no modern artiſt has been able to imitate, and which therefore is ſuppoſed to have been loſt. It is not very probable that a colour ſo common, as to pervade the works of the worſt as well as of the beſt artiſts of that ſchool, ſhould be ſo unaccountably loſt; and, as the effect attributed to it may be eaſily produced by the mode of painting I have deſcribed, it is not unreaſonable to conclude that this much-lamented colour has never exiſted.

It is well known that chalk, and other earths of the ſame kind, loſe, when wetter, much of their whiteneſs, and become ſemi-tranſparent: it is equally certain, that if umber or other earths are mixed with chalk, and ſaturated with varniſh after they are laid in the cloth, they in like manner become diaphanous, and are infinitely more brilliant than the ſame colours can be when mixed with white lead and oil. This ſeems, on good grounds, to have been the baſis of the Venetian method of painting, and all its peculiar effects; at leaſt, if I may draw any concluſion

concluſion from the numerous experiments I have made. But if artiſts, whoſe talents will enable them to repeat thoſe experiments to the beſt advantage, ſhould be induced to do ſo, the fact will be determined in the moſt ſatisfactory manner.

I may now be permitted to ſay, it is difficult, if not impoſſible, to conceive a theory more ſimple, more beautiful, or more true, than that of Sir Joſhua Reynolds. It is certainly impoſſible to form a practice more ſimple, or more conformable to that theory, than the one I have deſcribed, as will be evident on recapitulating the particulars.

The artiſt, having determined what hue ſhould pervade his picture, formed his ground with that colour prepared in diſtemper; upon this the ſubject was drawn, and the darker ſhades painted in with tranſparent colours, which ſunk into the ground: with pure white he then painted in all the lights and demi-tints, and, laſtly, glazed in the colours, each in its place. Upon applying the varniſh, the darker ſhades

were, as to body, incorporated with the ground; and thus, though different in colour, appeared thinner and more tranſparent than any colours could be when laid upon any ground: the full effect of every colour was brought out, and the picture was complete.

Whoever has been accuſtomed to paint, or to mark the progreſs of painting in the common way, and will reflect on the practice of the method I have deſcribed, by artiſts who had been brought up to it, muſt ſee that ſuch artiſts would paint with a degree of facility, expedition, and certainty, as to effect, that could never be equalled in the ordinary way of painting in oil; beſides, it will be evident that an artiſt would not only paint a picture himſelf with more facility, but, if he had occaſion, could employ a number of ſubordinate artiſts upon large works, and put thoſe works out of hand with more uniformity, as to merit and effect, than if he were to employ ſuch aſſiſtants in ſimilar works if they were to be painted in the common way.

I am

I am ſenſible how little attention will, and perhaps ought to be paid to obſervations on painting, if made by thoſe who are not profeſſionally artiſts: for practical men acquire a kind of knowledge that can never be obtained in any other way; but at the ſame time they contract prejudices that often prevent them from fully inveſtigating any novelty in practice that may be offered to their notice. The ſpeculative man, on the contrary, who inveſtigates the properties of matter, unſhackled by practical prejudices, and with ideas purely chemical or philoſophical, will be more likely to aſcertain all the facts relative to any theory that may become the object of enquiry. In this way I hope I have proceeded in this inveſtigation. I have endeavoured to conſider pictures as maſſes of matter, poſſeſſing the properties, but differing from each other in degree of brilliancy, tranſparency, and duration. I have endeavoured to aſcertain the cauſes of this difference, with what ſucceſs the Society will determine, and with what

utility, muſt be hereafter aſcertained, by the practice of thoſe for whoſe uſe the inveſtigation was intended.

I ought, perhaps, here to take leave of the ſubject; but as I have been induced to ſubmit to the Society's notice an attempt at painting, it may be expected that I ſhould give an account of the manner in which the pictures I have ſent were painted.

I have already mentioned, that there are ſome difficulties in the method of painting I have deſcribed, as being that of the old artiſts, and which would form objections of conſiderable force to the practice of it by artiſts who are well acquainted with the uſual modes of painting: theſe difficulties are, firſt, the ground abſorbs the oil from the colours ſo faſt, that they are not ſo manageable as in oil-painting; ſecondly, the effect of the picture is not ſeen till the finiſhing varniſh is laid on; and thirdly, as the effect is not ſeen till the picture is finiſhed, it will ſometimes diſappoint the artiſt, and in that caſe it will be difficult, if at all practicable, to alter it.

As I believe the proceſs I have deſcribed in the beginning of this Paper is ſimilar to that of Miſs Provis, the artiſts who are acquainted with her recipe can aſcertain whether my conjectures on this ſubject are right or not. I am certain at leaſt that theſe difficulties occurred in my attempts to paint, and to obviate them I adopted the following proceſs.

I prepared the ground in diſtemper, and painted the dark parts in the way I have deſcribed; I then varniſhed the ground with the copal oil-varniſh, till it was fully ſaturated, and by this means the full effect of that part of the picture was ſeen; upon this I painted the lighter parts with white, uſing much of the vehicle where the colour was thin, and little in the ſolid parts, leaving the white in them dead: by this means I underſtood the effect of my chiaro-oſcuro, as I ſaw the effect of the demi-tints nearly as well as when the picture was finiſhed.

Upon this I glazed the colours, in the way I have deſcribed in the beginning of this

this Paper, and finiſhed the picture. I often found (probably from want of practice) that the effect was different from what I intended, as the effect of the colours, added to that of the chiaro-oſcuro, produced an eſſential alteration in the whole; as I took care in general that the defect did not ariſe from too much white, I added more where it was deficient, and glazed freſh colours over it, which united perfectly with what had been done before, and did not give the appearance of a mended picture. If the defect was from too much white, I glazed on it a colour ſimilar to that of the ground, painted with freſh white upon that, and glazed the proper colours over it. In this way I found I could alter the picture, but not ſo well as in the former caſe.

I found I could, when neceſſary, increaſe the effect of the picture, by painting on the principal maſs or maſſes of light with the local colours, only mixed with white; as this practice brought thoſe parts more forward, by making them appear ſolid, and thus contraſting

traſting them with the tranſparency of the reſt of the picture. In this way I found I could uſe the colours tempered with copal varniſh without difficulty; and I believe, that if I had been accuſtomed to paint large pictures, I could have painted one as large as life as eaſily as either of thoſe I have ſubmitted to the Society's inſpection.

I am

The Society's moſt obedient,

humble ſervant,

TIM. SHELDRAKE.

Strand, Feb. 14, 1798.

PAPERS